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“Cheese and Chips out of Styrofoam Containers”: An Exploration of Taste and Cultural Symbols of Appropriate Family Foodways.

Introduction

Taste is considered a gustatory and physiological sense. It is also something that can be developed over time. In Bourdieu's work taste is a matter of distinction, and a means of drawing boundaries between groups about what constitutes “good” taste. In this context it is necessary to perform or display tastes over and over again. This then becomes part of a cultural habitus, a code that can be read and understood. In the field of “feeding the family” (DeVault) for respondents in my study, healthy food prepared from scratch became the symbol of appropriate mothering, a means of demonstrating a middle class habitus, distinction, and taste. I use the term “family foodways” to emphasize how feeding the family encapsulates more than buying, preparing, cooking, and serving food, it incorporates the ways in which families practice, perform, and “do” family food. These family foodways are about the family of today, as well as an investment in the family of the future, through the reproduction and reinforcement of cultural values and tastes around food.

In the UK, there are divisions between what might be considered appropriate and inappropriate family foodways, and a vilification of alternatives that lack time and effort. Warde identifies four antinomies of taste used by advertisers in the marketing of food: “novelty and tradition,” “health and indulgence,” “economy and extravagance,” and “convenience and care” (174). In relation to family foodways, there are inherent tensions in these antinomies, and for mothers in my study in order to demonstrate “care”, it was necessary to eschew “convenience.” Indeed, the time and effort involved in feeding the family healthy meals prepared from scratch becomes an important symbol of middle class taste and investment in the future. The alternative can be illustrated by reference to the media furore around Jamie Oliver's comments in a Radio Times interview (that coincided with a TV series and book launch) in which Deans quotes Oliver: “You might remember that scene in [a previous series] of Ministry of Food, with the mum and the kid eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive f***** TV.”

Oliver uses cultural markers of taste to highlight how “mum” was breaking the rules and conventions associated with appropriate or aspirational class based family foodways. We assume that the “mum and kid” were using their fingers, and not a knife and fork, and that the meal was not on a plate around a table but instead eaten in front of a “massive f***** TV.” Oliver uses these cultural markers of taste and distinction to commit acts of symbolic violence, defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant, as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (67), to confer judgement and moral approbation regarding family foodways. In this example, a lack of time and effort is associated with a lack of taste. And although this can be linked with poverty, this is not about a lack of money, as

the mother and child are eating in front of a big television. Oliver is therefore drawing attention to how family foodways become cultural markers of taste and distinction.

I argue that appropriate family foodways have become significant markers of taste, and draw on qualitative data to emphasise how respondents use these to position themselves as “good” mothers. Indeed, the manner of presenting, serving, and eating food fulfils the social function of legitimising social difference (Bourdieu 6). Indeed, Bourdieu claims that mothers are significant as the convertors of economic capital into cultural capital for their children; they are “sign bearing” carriers of taste (Skeggs 22). In taking time to prepare healthy meals from scratch, sourcing organic and/or local ingredients, accommodating each individual household members food preferences or individual health needs, being able to afford to waste food, to take time over the preparation, and eating of a meal around the table together, are all aspects of an aspirational model of feeding the family. This type of intensive effort around feeding becomes a legitimate means of demonstrating cultural distinction and taste.

Research Background

This paper draws on data from a qualitative study conducted over nine months in 2011. I carried out a series of asynchronous on-line interviews with seventy-five mostly middle class women and men between the ages of twenty-seven and eighty-five. One third of the respondents were male. Two thirds were parents at different stages in the life course, from those who were new to parenting to grand parents. There was also a range of family types including lone parents, and co-habiting and married couples with children (and step-children). The focus of the inquiry was food over the life course and respondents were invited to write their own autobiographical food narratives. Once respondents agreed to participate, I wrote to them:

What I’m really after is your “food story.” Perhaps, this will include your earliest food memories, favourite foods, memorable food occasions, whether your eating habits have changed over time and why this may be. Also, absolutely anything food related that you’d like to share with me.

For some, if this proved difficult, we engaged in an on-line interview in which I asked a series of questions centred on how they developed their own eating and cooking habits. I did not set out to question respondents specifically about “healthy” or “unhealthy” foodways and did not mention these terms at all. It was very much an open invitation for them to tell their stories in their words and on their terms. It was the common vocabularies (Mills) across the narratives that I was looking to discover, rather than directing these vocabularies in any particular way. I conducted several levels of analysis on the data and identified four themes on the family, health, the body, and the foodie. This discussion is based on the narratives I identified within the family theme.

A Taste for “Healthy” Family Foodways

When setting out on this research journey, I anticipated a considerable shift in gender roles within the home and a negotiated family model in which “everything could be negotiated” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim xxi), especially “feeding the family” (De-Vault). Considering the rise of male celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver and the development of a distinct foodie identity (Naccarato and LeBesco, Johnston and Baumann, Cairns et al.), I envisaged that

men would be more likely to take on this role. Given women's roles outside the home, I also envisaged the use of convenience food, ready meals, and take-away food. However, what emerged was that women were highly resistant to any notion of relinquishing the responsibility for "feeding the family" (DeVault). Indeed, the women who were parents were keen to demonstrate how they engaged in preparing healthy, home-cooked meals from scratch for their families, despite having working identities. This commitment to healthy family foodways was used as a means of aligning themselves with an intensive mothering ideology (Hays) and to distance themselves from the alternative. It was a means of drawing distinctions and symbolising taste.

When it comes to feeding the family, the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 167) afforded to mothers who transgress the boundaries of appropriate mothering by feeding their children unhealthy and/or convenience food, meant that mothers in my study only fed their children healthy food. It would be inconceivable for them to admit to anything else. This I consider a consequence of dualist and absolutist approaches to food and foodways, whereby "convenience" food continues to be demonised in family food discourses because it symbolises "lack" on many levels, specifically a lack of care and a lack of taste. This was not something I had anticipated at the beginning of the study; that mothers would not use convenience food and only prepared "healthy" meals was a surprise. This is indicative of the power of healthy food discourses and inappropriate family foodways, as symbolised by the mum feeding her kid "cheese and chips out of a Styrofoam container," in informing respondents' food narratives.

I gained full ethical approval from my university and all respondents were given pseudonyms. The quotes I use here are taken from the narratives within the family theme and are representative of this theme. I cannot include all respondents' narratives. I include quotes from Faye, a forty-six year-old Secretary married with one child; Laura, a thirty-five year-old Teaching Assistant, married with two children; Zoe, a forty-four year-old Recruiter, married with two children; Gaby, a fifty-one year old Architect Designer, married with two children; Ophelia, a fifty-three year-old Author, married with two children; Valerie, a forty-six year-old Website Manager, single with one child; and Chloe, a forty-six year old Occupational Health Sex Advisor, co-habiting with two children at home.

Cooking "proper" healthy family meals is a skilled practice (Short) and a significant aspect of meaningful family-integration (Moiso et al.). It has symbolic and cultural capital and is indicative of a particular middle class habitus and this relates to taste in its broadest sense. Hence, Faye writes:

My mum was a fabulous, creative cook; she loved reading cookery books and took great pride in her cooking. We didn't have a lot of money when we were young, but my mum was a very creative cook and every meal was completely delicious and homemade.

Faye, despite working herself, and in common with many women juggling the second shift (Hochschild and Machung), is solely responsible for feeding her family. Indeed, Faye's comments are strikingly similar to those in DeVault's research carried out over twenty years ago; one of DeVault's participants was quoted as saying that, "as soon as I get up on the morning or before I go to bed I'm thinking of what we're going to eat tomorrow" (56). It is

significant that cultural changes in the twenty years since DeVaults' study were not reflected in respondents' narratives. Despite women working outside of the home, men moving into the kitchen, and easy access to a whole range of convenience foods, women in my study adhered to "healthy" family foodways as markers of taste and distinction. Two decades later, Faye comments:

Oh my goodness! I wake up each morning and the first thing I think about is what are we going to have for supper! It's such a drag, as I can never think of anything new or inspirational, despite the fact that we have lots of lovely cookery books!

In many ways, these comments serve to reinforce further the status of "feeding the family" (DeVault) as central to maternal identity and part of delineating distinction and taste. Faye, in contrast to her own mother, has the additional pressure of having to cook new and inspirational food. Indeed, if preparing and purchasing food for herself or her family, Faye writes:

I would make a packed lunch of something I really enjoyed eating, that's healthy, balanced and nutritious, with a little treat tucked in! [...] I just buy things that are healthy and nutritious and things that might be interesting to appear in [my daughter's] daily lunch box!

However, by "just buying things that are healthy", Faye is contributing to the notion that feeding the family healthily is easy, natural, care work and part of a particular middle class habitus. Again, this is part of what distinguishes cultural approaches to family foodways. Health and healthiness are part of a neo-liberal approach that is about a taste for the future. It is not about instant gratification, but about safeguarding health. Faye positions herself as the "guardian of health" (Beagan et al. 662). This demonstrates the extent to which the caringscape and healthscape can be intertwined (McKie et al.), as well as how health discourses seep into family foodways, whereby a "good mother" ensures the health of her children through cooking/providing healthy food or by being engaged in emotion (food) work. Faye reiterates this by writing, "if I have time [my cooking skills] [...] are very good, if I don't they are rumbled together! But everything I cook is cooked with love!" Hence, this emotion work is not considered work at all, but an expression of love. Hence, in terms of distinction and taste, even when cooking is rushed it is conceptualised in the context of being prepared with love, in opposition to the cultural symbol of the mother and child "eating cheese and chips out of a Styrofoam container."

Convenience "Lacks" Taste

In the context of Warde's care and convenience antinomy, food associated with convenience is considered inappropriate. Cooking a family meal from scratch demonstrates care, convenience food for mothers symbolises "lack" on many levels. This lack of care is interwoven into a symbolic capital that supposes a lack of time, education, cultural capital, economic capital, and therefore a lack of taste. Hence, Laura writes:

We never buy cakes and eat very few convenience foods, apart from the odd fish finger in a wrap, or a tin of beans. Ready meals and oven chips don't appeal to me and I want my kids to grow up eating real food.

It is notable that Laura makes the distinction between convenience and "real" food. Similarly, Zoe claims:

We eat good interesting food every day at home and a takeaway once in a blue moon (2–3 times a year). Ready meals are unheard of here and we eat out sometimes (once a month).

In Gaby's account she makes reference to: "junk food, synthetic food and really overly creamy/stodgy cheap calorie foods" and claims that this kind of food makes her feel "revolted." In James's research she makes connections between "junk food" and "junk families." In Gaby's account she has a corporeal reaction to the thought of the type of food associated with cheapness and convenience.

Ophelia notes that:

After 15 years of daily cooking for my family I have become much more confident and proficient in food and what it really means. Today I balance the weekly meals between vegetarian, pasta, fish and meat and we have a lot of salad. I have been trying to cook less meat, maybe twice or sometimes including a roast at weekends, three times a week. Teens need carbs so I cook them most evenings but I don't eat carbs myself in the evening now unless it's a pasta dish we are all sharing.

Here, Ophelia is highlighting the balance between her desires and the nutritional needs of her children. The work of feeding the family is complex and incorporates a balance of different requirements.

The need to display appropriate mothering through feeding the family healthy meals cooked from scratch, was especially pertinent for women working and living on their own with children, such as Valerie:

I am also responsible for feeding my daughter [...] I make a great effort to make sure she is getting a balanced diet. To this end I nearly always cook meals from scratch. I use meal planners to get organised. I also have to budget quite tightly and meal planning helps with this. I aim to ensure we eat fish a couple of times a week, chicken a couple of times of week, red meat maybe once or twice and vegetarian once or twice a week. We always sit down to eat together at the table, even if it is just the two of us. It gives us a chance to talk and focus on each other.

It is notable that Valerie insists that they sit down to eat at a table. This is a particular aspect of a middle class habitus and one that distinguishes Valerie's family foodways from others, despite their low income. Hence, "proper" mothering is about cooking "proper" meals from scratch, even or perhaps especially if on a limited budget or having the sole responsibility for childcare. Chloe claims:

I like to cook from scratch and meals can take time so I have to plan that around work [...] I use cookbooks for ideas for quick suppers [...] thinking about it I do spend quite a lot of time thinking about what I'm going to cook. I shop with meals in mind for each night of the week [...] this will depend on what's available in the shops and what looks good, and then what time I get home.

Here, food provision is ultimately tied up with class and status and again the provision of good "healthy" food is about good "healthy" parenting. It is about time and the lack of it. A lack of time due to having to work outside of the home and the lack of time to prepare or

care about preparing healthy meals from scratch. Convenience food is clearly associated with low socio-economic status, a particular working class habitus and lack of care.

Conclusion

In an era of heightened neo-liberal individualism, there was little evidence of a “negotiated family model” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim) within respondents’ narratives. Mothers in my study went to great lengths to emphasise that they fed their children “healthy” food prepared from scratch. Feeding the family is a central aspect of maternal identity, with intensive mothering practices (Hays) associated with elite cultural capital and a means of drawing distinctions between groups. Hence, despite working full time or part time, the blurring of boundaries between home and work, and the easy availability of convenience foods, ready-meals, and take-away food, women in my study were committed to feeding the family healthy meals cooked from scratch as a means of differentiating their family foodways from others. Dualist and absolutist approaches to food and foodways means that unhealthy and convenience food and foodways are demonised. They are derided and considered indicative of lack on many levels, especially in terms of lacking taste in its broadest sense. Unhealthy or convenient family foodways are associated with “other” (working class) mothering practices, whereby a lack of care indicates a lack of education, time, money, cultural capital, and taste. There are rigid cultural scripts of mothering, especially for middle class mothers concerned with distancing themselves from the symbol of the mum who feeds her children convenience food, or “cheese and chips out of Styrofoam containers in front of a f***ing big television.”

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